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Yugoslavia: Burgeoning Slovene Political
Groups--Toward a Multiparty System?

Summary

Independent, non-Communist political groups in Yugoslavia's Republic of Slovenia are growing in number, becoming increasingly well-organized, fielding candidates for regional positions, and straining the tolerance of both traditionally liberal Slovene leaders and more orthodox leaders elsewhere. These groups vary in size and goals, but are generally committed to promoting a more Western-style political system. Their fate depends in part on the outcome of national political struggles now being waged over Serbian leader Milosevic's bid for greater power. If, as we believe, Milosevic is constrained, the Slovene leadership probably will allow the most moderate groups to play an increasingly active and influential role in the Slovene political system, despite the hostility of more orthodox federal and regional leaders as well as, to a lesser extent, the military. Other groups that overtly seek to overturn Communist Party supremacy, though, probably will be repressed.

The phenomenon of non-Communist political groups is unlikely to spread quickly beyond Slovenia. In the short term the Slovene developments will aggravate inter-regional tensions and instability, but in the longer term they will promote US interests in political liberalization and human rights and widen the ideological gap between Yugoslavia and the Soviet bloc.

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Discussion

Growth of Semi-Official Political Groups in Slovenia

The development of non-Communist political groups in Slovenia has its origin in the single-issue "alternative movements" that have arisen in the republic since at least 1985, when environmental, peace, and anti-nuclear groups formed. According to press reports, these groups originally were small, narrowly focused, and had no set membership or formal organization. Their followers were mostly university students. Since last spring, the number of these political groups and their issues have grown, and several have begun to increasingly resemble political parties.

Slovenia has been the country's main site for non-Communist political groups because it is the most Western-oriented republic and has a long tradition of tolerating opposing views. The two million Slovenes, once members of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, have strong ties with Central European cultures and a conviction that more human and civil rights would help ease Yugoslavia's many economic and political problems. By contrast, the ethnic groups of Yugoslavia's southern republics developed under the more despotic rule of the Ottoman Turks. Only Croatia, which also developed under Hapsburg rule, approaches Slovenia in its Westward orientation.

The Most Prominent Groups

While the single-issue "alternative movements" continue to exist, four vocal and important new groups have begun to play an increasingly pronounced role in Slovene politics. They have developed platforms, organized meetings, run candidates for republic elections, and addressed a range of significant political issues. Their members and leaders reflect the views and desires of a majority of Slovenes better than their predecessors in the "alternative movements."

The Slovene groups, however, also manifest an insular nationalism, reflecting the republic's intense pride and disdain for what it considers the more backward southern nationalities. Not only do these groups' names all bear the word "Slovene," but most of their platforms are aimed primarily at changing conditions in the republic, not the country.

In roughly descending order, starting with the more radical groups most likely to challenge the existing one-party system, these groups include:

- o **The Slovene Social Democratic Association (SDA).** The SDA, which calls itself an autonomous political organization, is the most nationalist of the four groups and the most vocal opponent of the Communist Party. During its founding meeting in mid-February, its leaders were deliberately vague as to whether they would work within the Socialist Alliance*--the apparent litmus test used by the Slovene leadership to judge whether a group is acceptable. The SDA now claims it will only work within the Socialist Alliance if the Alliance changes its charter so that Communist Party members do not get preferential treatment for nominations to government posts.

* The Socialist Alliance is a mass organization under the auspices of the Communist Party that nominates candidates for government positions. The republic legislature elects republic and federal government officials from the Socialist Alliance's list of nominees.

The SDA argues that every citizen has the right to live in freedom and prosperity and to choose and dismiss leaders according to democratic procedures. More specifically, press reports indicate the SDA favors a European-type parliamentary system in Slovenia and direct elections with secret ballots for all republic offices. Press reports number its members between 330 and 1,500, consisting of both intellectuals and workers. Its first goal is the drafting of a new Slovene constitution that would more clearly delineate and protect Slovene sovereignty within the federation. Part of its platform also advocates some type of Slovene cultural forum and unspecified rights for Slovenes all over the world. The SDA is the only one of the four most prominent groups to have an economic platform. It calls for a free-market economy, emphasizing private entrepreneurship and an end to the welfare state.

- o **The Slovene Democratic Union of Reason (SDU).** The SDU is only somewhat less outspoken in opposing Communist one-party rule than the SDA. According to the SDU's program, its leaders want to establish a parliamentary democracy in Slovenia modeled on that in Western Europe. It differs from the SDA in that it views itself as an umbrella organization for other groups, like the SDA and the Peasants' Union (discussed below), that agree with its program. According to recent press reports, the SDU has over 1,400 members. At the SDU's founding congress last December, some members vowed not to work within the Socialist Alliance and to publicly challenge the Communist Party. Though this view reportedly received resounding applause, the SDU's moderates prevailed and it was not adopted. The SDU's platform is the most specific of any of the four groups. It includes:

- Adoption of a new Slovene constitution that guarantees Slovene sovereignty over defense, political, and economic policies.

- Abolition of courts martial and military trials during peacetime to prevent such occurrences as last spring's arrest and military trial of Slovene journalists. Opposition to street populism, a probable reference to pro-Serbian nationalist demonstrations, sometimes with anti-Slovene overtones, that have taken place over the past year.

- Abolition of such elite privileges and abuses as bribes, country homes, and other perks.

- The protection of Slovenia's natural, cultural, and historical heritage.

- o **The Slovene Committee for the Protection of Human Rights.** Founded last spring to defend three Slovene youth journalists accused by the military of disclosing state secrets, this committee has grown in scope and political influence. Republic leaders claim that it has more members than the Slovene Communist Party, which numbered about 130,000 in 1983. By all accounts the committee leader, Igor Bavcar, has become popular with the Slovene public, making him a force with which the Slovene leadership must contend. The committee still is predominantly concerned with the fate of the journalists, who remain free pending the start of their sentences. According to press reports, however, it has pursued the case of other Slovenes whose human rights, it claims, have been abused by the Army. The press indicates the committee more recently has also begun pushing for unspecified political reforms.

Despite its growing influence, this group's challenge to the system is likely to

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stay limited. Bavcar has assured authorities that his committee is not an opposition party, or a party of any kind, and has pledged to work to ensure Slovene rights within the existing one-party system and from within the Socialist Alliance. Last fall, however, Bavcar ran for a position on the republic's collective Presidency. He reportedly received a plurality of support from delegates to the republican Socialist Alliance at the opcina (county) level, but received the least number of total votes cast within the Alliance. The county-level delegates comprise only one-third of the total number of delegates, with the remaining two-thirds controlled by institutions (party, trade unions, youth league, etc.) who voted solidly against the non-party candidate. Press reports indicate committees with similar names and goals have formed in Vojvodina Province and the Republic of Montenegro. It is unclear if they have any connection to the Slovene committee.

- o **The Slovene Peasants' Union.** The Peasants' Union began as the least controversial of the four groups profiled here but now seems to be allying itself with radical groups. Farmers founded the Union last May as a professional organization exclusively devoted to advancing their economic and social interests. According to press reports the group, which held its first annual meeting in mid-March, currently has about 20,000 members. The Union's leadership has vowed to work within the Socialist Alliance as long as the Communist Party respects the Union's rights and objectives. The Union ran a candidate to fill an opening in the republic Presidency last fall. The candidate lost but did somewhat better than Bavcar in getting votes in the Socialist Alliance. According to the press, it has since agreed to work with the SDA and SDU to get its people elected to republic offices.

Slovene and Federal Leadership Reaction

The Slovene leadership is divided on the wisdom of a multiparty system and is torn between conflicting pressures from its populace and federal leaders in Belgrade. Nonetheless, it appears to be developing at least an ad hoc strategy for dealing with these groups. On the one hand, the Slovene leadership in both public and private statements supports and even encourages political groups that work within the Socialist Alliance. Republic President Janez Stanovnik, for example, told a Western audience last fall that he regularly consults with Human Rights Committee head Bavcar to get input on policy decisions.

On the other hand, the leadership appears to be toughening its stand toward opposition groups that refuse to work with the Socialist Alliance. In the first such move reported from Slovenia, the Western press indicates the republic leadership last December, through bureaucratic maneuverings, prevented a founding meeting of the SDA when that group initially claimed it would work outside the system against the Communist Party. The leadership allowed the SDA to hold the gathering in February, but only after the group's leaders agreed to work within the Socialist Alliance.

Slovene authorities appear torn between conceding greater political pluralism and remaining in step with more orthodox leaders elsewhere in Yugoslavia. Virtually all top Slovene leaders have issued statements condemning the development of a multiparty system, which is unconstitutional. However, an official republic press release this February threatened that Slovenia would not participate in the Communist Party Congress scheduled for this December if its purpose was merely to reaffirm the Party's leading role. The Slovene leadership apparently intends to push for reduced constraints on activities of non-Communist political groups, possibly by amending the party statutes.

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Most leaders outside of Slovenia are hostile to the republic's burgeoning political groups. They fear the groups' nationalist bent will lead the republic to grow even more isolationist and perhaps even try to secede. Moreover, they fear it would set a precedent for the development of other regionally-based parties that would aggravate ethnic tensions and instability, as happened during the interwar era. Other officials oppose Slovene-style political liberalism because more direct elections and democratic procedures could threaten their positions. For example, the State Presidency recently reiterated its opposition to the formation of non-Communist political parties--a clear slap at the Slovenes--in response to demands from Serbian demonstrators in Belgrade presumably fomented by Serbian leader Milosevic.

Only the Croatian leadership has not joined in the criticism of Slovenia, although it has denounced as nationalist some of the fledgling political groups in its republic.

Prospects for a Multiparty System

The future of multiparty politics in Slovenia and nationwide hinges in large measure on the outcome of the broader political struggle over Serbian nationalism and of such other threats to national stability as deepening economic problems. If, as we believe likely, Slovenia and other republics contain the drive for national power by Serbia's Milosevic and preserve the current system of regional checks and balances, elements of a multiparty system are likely to be instituted in Slovenia, and to a lesser extent Yugoslavia, over the next several years.

In Slovenia, prospects are good for constitutional and party statute changes in the coming year or two that would allow non-Communist candidates to gain election to high-level republic and ultimately national-level posts. Under such a system leading republic-level government positions--such as premier, president, and interior minister--may be reserved for Communists while less sensitive positions (such as economic officials and the Socialist Alliance chairman) may be open to non-Communist groups. Such a trend will be increasingly likely if, as we expect, the independent political groups cooperate further and perhaps form coalitions with each other and with official groups like the League of Socialist Youth. According to Slovene press reports, the SDA and SDU already are planning to participate in the May 1990 elections for republic and national posts, although it is uncertain whether new amendments to the Slovene constitution permitting independent participation will be approved by then.

At the same time, in response to pressure from outside Slovenia, the Slovene authorities will likely take some repressive measures to rein in the more radical groups, like the SDA and SDU, if they overtly oppose the existing Communist system. Slovene leaders may continue to ban unauthorized meetings, criticize these groups in the media, and as a last resort arrest some group leaders.

Steps toward greater political pluralism nationwide will likely advance, though at a slower pace than in Slovenia. Few non-Communist groups with agendas as broad as some of the Slovene ones are likely to develop outside Slovenia. Nonetheless, last year the Federal Socialist Alliance passed rules allowing semi-official, single-issue groups to exist within their body. The Federal Trade Union has stated that it will develop a new charter this year that will give them more autonomy from the Communist Party. The League of Socialist Youth is also discussing working outside of the Socialist Alliance and declaring itself autonomous from the Communist Party. The Party itself is continuing in practice to defer decisions on key economic and national security issues to governmental

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bodies like the State Presidency, cabinet, and Assembly. [REDACTED]

Drafting of a new federal constitution is scheduled to begin this spring. While approval of any new federal constitution is likely to take four or five years, some of the more far-reaching political reforms which may be included are:

- o the legalization of parties other than the Communist Party;
- o the legalization of election of non-Communist party members to some government posts;
- o direct, popular elections for all republic and some national positions. [REDACTED]

Impact on US Interests

In the near term at least, the development of non-Communist political groups in Slovenia will aggravate instability in Yugoslavia. Open disputes between Slovene and federal leaders--resulting in occasional repressive actions against some groups--are likely to increase Slovene feelings of alienation and aggravate ethnic tensions between them and the more orthodox southern republics. These tensions will make agreement on key national issues, like implementing economic reform, even harder. If strains over Serbian nationalism and repression of Albanian rights in Kosovo increase further, the political split between the liberal north and orthodox south will deepen. [REDACTED]

Nonetheless, the growth of independent political groups in Slovenia can advance US interests over the medium and long term, especially if the Milosevic challenge is contained. This political process will accelerate Yugoslavia's progress toward **political liberalization** and respect for **human rights**. This progress already has gone well beyond traditional Yugoslav and current Soviet bloc norms, thus **widening the ideological gap with Moscow** and increasing Belgrade's Westward orientation. If the Yugoslavs can continue to show their facility for compromise, adaptation, and evolution, the Slovene example may increasingly promote a more truly democratic government that, in the long run, would enhance not only political liberalization and human rights but also stability and more prosperous economic development. [REDACTED]

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